

THE PRICE OF FAME

A COMEDY DUOLOGUE
IN ONE ACT

By
WALTER R. MATTHEWS

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THE PRICE OF FAME

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

GEORGE VICARS.

NORA VICARS.

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THE PRICE OF FAME

SCENE.—*Dining-room at "The Nest," the home of MR. and MRS. GEORGE VICARS. A bright, pleasant room, furnished with excellent taste. C., an oval, gate-leg table, with breakfast appointments for two.*

Time, about 8.15 a.m.

(*Enter GEORGE VICARS, briskly, R. He goes to the table, picks up a letter and tears it open.*)

GEORGE (*having skimmed through the contents.*)
By Jove! (*Calling.*) Nora! (*No answer.*) (*He goes to the door.*) Nora! News!

A VOICE. Well?

(*GEORGE returns C.*)

GEORGE. I thought it would fetch 'em! (*He smacks his leg.*) A thousand pounds! Hooray! (*He goes to the door.*) If you're not quick, Nora, I shall . . . !

(*Enter NORA, calmly, carrying a man's jacket. GEORGE drags her into the room, holding the letter behind his back.*)

GEORGE. Who said her Georgie was an old goose?

NORA (*candidly*). His darling Nora did! There! (*She puts down the jacket on a chair.*)

GEORGE. Wait till you know! Whatever have you been doing?

NORA (*looking at the breakfast-table, critically*). Putting your clothes away, you untidy boy. And looking what needed mending. The buttons you lose, George . . . !

GEORGE. Untidiness, and a disregard for appearances, my dear girl, are a mark of genius—splendid, erratic genius !

NORA (*busy with the cups and saucers*). Oh ! Since when ?

GEORGE. Since . . . three weeks ago, to-day. (*Coming towards her.*) What do you think the post-man brought this morning ? You can't guess !

NORA. Yes, I can. Bills !

GEORGE. Wrong ! Just look here. (NORA *turns. He gives her the letter.*) Read this to me. I want to hear it again !

(GEORGE *looks over her shoulder, while she reads.*)

NORA (*reading*).

“ DEAR SIR,—

“ We have the pleasure to inform you that our adjudicators have awarded you the first prize of One Thousand Pounds in our great ‘ Rubicon ’ Contest, Number 43, for your ‘ Rubicon ’—

Immense, “ Successful Matrimony.”

“ We enclose cheque, which please acknowledge in course, and much oblige,

“ Yours faithfully,

“ Scissors & Paste,

“ THE EDITOR.”

George !

GEORGE (*waving the cheque before her eyes*). And there you are !

(NORA *drops the letter and kisses him rapturously.*)

NORA. You *are* a clever boy ! However did you do it ?

GEORGE. Aha !

NORA. Oh, do tell me, George!

GEORGE. Well, withdraw the "Goose," and then . . .

NORA. You're a—a swan! There! But what is a "Rubicon"?

GEORGE (*getting on a footstool and assuming a professor-like air*). The Rubicon, my dear child, is a stream in Central Italy, which was crossed by Caius Julius Cæsar about . . .

NORA (*stopping his mouth with her hand*). Now, George, no lectures!

GEORGE (*stepping down*). Very well. Three weeks ago, to-day, you may remember, I went to the City, as is my custom, by the 8.42. Having expended one of my hard-earned coppers on a copy of *Scissors & Paste*, I proceeded to devour the contents of that brainy periodical.

NORA. Oh, do get along!

GEORGE. You are evidently unaware that it runs a competition each week, first prize a thousand pounds, for what it calls "Rubicons."

NORA. Getting warm!

GEORGE. Your hitherto-despised, and now rightly-esteemed husband made up his "Rubicon," bought his postal order, cast his bread on the waters, and (*waving the cheque*) behold!

NORA. But what is a "Rubicon"?

GEORGE. Caius Julius Cæsar, about the year . . .
(NORA *makes a warning gesture*.) Well, it's like this:—You think of a word, and then you take two of its letters and make them begin two words with some bearing on the original. Thus "Immense" gives us "Successful Matrimony" . . .

NORA. And a thousand pounds! You're a darling! And how sweet of you. "Successful Matrimony"! George, you can leave your things about as much as you like!

GEORGE. Genius coming into its own!

NORA. Do let me look at it! (*He gives her*

the cheque.) How lovely! (*She kisses it.*) Why didn't you tell me you were going in for it?

GEORGE. Well, to tell the truth, I suppose I was half-ashamed of it. . . .

NORA. Oh, you silly, timid old dear! Wouldn't tell his little wife!

GEORGE. Yes, it *was* silly. (*He comes up to her.*) Well, and what would she like?

NORA. She doesn't want *anything*. (*She reflects a little.*) But she saw the sweetest little hat at Jacqueline's yesterday. (*Reminiscently.*) It was a dark biscuit tagal straw, with a nattier blue plume brought over. . . . Oh, *such* a darling! (*She clasps her hands in ecstasy.*)

GEORGE. Its hours at Madame Jacqueline's are numbered!

NORA. You angel! (*She kisses him.*) And—did I tell you?—Edith Chesterfield has one of the duckiest pendants you ever saw . . . oval, with pearls and turquoises in three rows. Dick gave it her at Christmas. . . . (*Suddenly.*) Oh, what a selfish little thing I am, spending his hard-earned money for him! The sweat of his brow! Poor old boy! Was it very hard?

GEORGE. No! (*Impressively.*) Nora, I was as one *inspired*! By Jove! It's the best five minutes' work I ever did!

(*Clock strikes the half-hour.*)

Good heavens! Half-past! I'd forgotten all about breakfast. No 8.42 to-day. Give me some coffee, quick! (*He begins to eat, standing at the table.*) I specially wanted (*bite*) to be early, this morning.

NORA (*pouring out his coffee*). Never mind, dear. You don't get such a nice letter every morning. You've heaps of time for the 9.15. (*She puts sugar in his cup.*) One, two . . . and *three*, because he's such a clever boy!

GEORGE (*taking the cup and sitting down*). If you knew how much I had to do this morning . . .

NORA (*pointing her finger at him, roguishly*). More "Rubicons" ?

GEORGE (*drinks, then*). Not likely they'll let me win twice !

NORA. No ? Why not ? (*GEORGE is too busy to reply.*) (*She sets down her cup, meditatively.*) George . . . will they put your name in the paper ?

GEORGE (*indistinctly*). Umm ! . . . Yes, I suppose they will. I hadn't thought of that. (*Dubiously.*) I shall get awfully chaffed. . . . (*With a laugh.*) Never mind, it's worth it. (*He resumes his breakfast.*)

NORA. But suppose, . . . (*To herself.*) I don't believe I read all that letter, . . . (*She rises, and picks up the letter from the floor. She reads it again.*) GEORGE is munching steadily, and admiring the cheque, laid out on the table before him.) Oh ! I thought as much ! George ! (*No response.*) George !

GEORGE. Well, dear ? I can't hear when I'm crunching toast !

NORA. George, he's coming here ! (*She goes up to him.*) See. . . (*Reading.*) "Our representative will call on you to-morrow (Tuesday) morning."

(NORA comes back to her chair.)

GEORGE. What for, I should like to know ! Here's the cheque ! I don't want to see the beggar !

NORA (*thoughtfully*). George, have you got a Scissors & Paste here ?

GEORGE (*helping himself to further supplies*). Yes, in my overcoat pocket.

(NORA exit. GEORGE goes on eating. NORA re-enters, bringing a folded paper. She crosses and sits in a chair near the fireplace.)

NORA (*unfolding the paper*). I thought it had a yellow cover. . .

GEORGE. It has. But I tear it off. It's too blinding.

(NORA turns over the pages. Suddenly rising in horror.)

NORA. Oh!

GEORGE (*wiping his mouth*). Well?

NORA. I see why he's coming! How awful!

GEORGE. Who's timid now?

NORA. George . . . you're going to be . . . interviewed!

GEORGE (*getting up*). No! I say! . . .

NORA (*going up to him*). Yes, you are! Here's the man who won in Number Forty-two. (*Reading.*) "Lucky Mr. Rowbottom. . . . How a Durham Miner won a Thousand Pounds. . . ." And a photograph!

GEORGE. Good heavens!

NORA. There's a whole column about him. All about his house, and his work, and how he began, and what his "mates" used to say, and how old he is, and what his wife is like. . . . (*Reading.*) "It will mean a new rig-out for me, said Mrs. Rowbottom to our representative. . . ." (*She casts the paper from her.*) Oh, George . . . how horrible! And the . . . the posters! What will people say? (*She sits down in the chair GEORGE has just left, in an ecstasy of mortification.*)

GEORGE (*hopelessly*). We can't help it now.

NORA. We shall have to remove—give up this dear little home, and . . . and . . . go away. (*She becomes tearful.*)

GEORGE (*coming up behind her*). Darling . . . don't! (*He pats her shoulder.*) Perhaps it won't be so bad as all that. . . . (*With assumed gaiety.*) At any rate, I'm not a miner!

NORA (*indignantly*). How can you joke about it, George! (*She rises.*) Have you forgotten what the

vicar said, on Sunday, about gambling, "sapping the nation's strength," or "moral fibre,"—I forget which? He mentioned newspaper competitions, too. Mrs. Rantipole will never call here again. (*Despairingly.*) Oh! (*She leans her head on her husband's chest.*)

GEORGE. The deuce! (*He remembers the cheque, puts her gently away from him and brings it from the table.*) But . . . darling! (*Holding the cheque above his head.*) Look! Madame Jacqueline! (*NORAH looks up, with a brave smile.*) Turquoises . . .

NORA. . . . and pearls! Oh, George, I wish . . .

GEORGE (*putting the cheque away safely*). We must make the best of it, Nora!

NORA. Yes. But how? Let me think! (*She goes to the window, stands there a moment, looking out, then turns.*) I know!

GEORGE (*anxiously*). I wish I did! Well?

NORA (*coming towards him*). We must get your life-story ready before he comes! You know you'd make a fearful mess of things, if you weren't prepared.

GEORGE. You mean . . . make it what it *ought* to be, to sound well! Umm! . . . It's rather—

NORA (*decisively*). George, it's our only chance! We'd better be quick. He might come any minute!

GEORGE. Not at breakfast-time, surely!

NORA. I've heard some of these newspaper men stay up and work all night. He may come here on his way home to bed, tired and crabby. Oh, *do* think of something!

(*Pause. GEORGE is by the fireplace. NORA stands in front of the table.*)

GEORGE (*venturously*). Ask him if he'll have any . . . supper!

NORA (*with a withering glance*). George!

GEORGE. Sorry. Well I can wash my face and brush my hair, so as to give him a good impression. How can we tell what he's likely to ask?

NORA (*triumphantly*). I'll tell you what! Sup-

pose I pretend to be the man, and I'll ask you questions! You'll feel ever so much more comfortable, at the time.

GEORGE (*coming forward a little*). All right. We'll see how it works.

NORA. We'll begin at once. (*She crosses to the door.*) (*She turns, assuming the rôle at once, and advances with outstretched hand.*) Ah! Good morning. Mr. Vicars! Allow me to congratulate you on your splendid success! The Editor's compliments, and he hopes you will be good enough to give me a few details about yourself for our next issue. . . . How's that?

GEORGE. Oh, all right, I should think. Fire away!

NORA. Let me see . . . what was the first thing about the miner?

(GEORGE *hands her the paper.*)

Oh! . . . (*Reading.*) "I found Mr. Rowbottom in his snug little cottage, plain and humble as befitted his lot, but Mrs. Rowbottom's busy hands had made it fit for a prince. 'Plenty of what I call elbow-grease,' said she, when I complimented her. . . ." Good gracious! Mary must dust the drawing-room at once! (*Reading.*) "Mrs. Rowbottom is a bright, motherly soul, whose eyes twinkled merrily when I told her of her husband's good fortune. 'Isaac has been trying your "Rubicons" for months,' she remarked . . ."

GEORGE. My dear girl, he's coming to see *me*—not you and the house!

NORA. I know! (*Reading.*) "Mr. Rowbottom told me his chief recreation was music. He is a noted performer on the melodion, and I noticed in a corner of the best parlour a fine new American organ. 'That,' said the favoured one, with pride, 'that was the first thing I bought when I heard of my success from *Scissors & Paste*. 'We shall often have a bit of music

of 'an evening, now,' he added. . . ." George, what about *your* hobbies. . . .?

GEORGE (*entering into the spirit of the thing*). My hobbies . . . ?

NORA (*adopting the interviewer's manner*). Er . . . Tell me something of your hobbies, Mr. Vicars.

GEORGE. Well Mr. —, I play a round or two of golf now and then. I cycle a good deal during the summer months. A little tennis—when I can spare the time. We played every afternoon, last week, Nora! My wife and I are very fond of music, and Mrs. Vicars has a very pleasing soprano voice, trained by Madame de Bulki . . .

NORA (*threateningly*). Now, George, if you do . . . ! (*Again turning interviewer*.) Er . . . you are really too modest, Mr. Vicars. And now, your business . . . ?

GEORGE. I am with the famous West African Firm, Messrs. Firewater & Co., with whom I have risen to a position of great responsibility, during the last fifteen years. Ahem! Gently, Nora!

NORA (*pretending to scribble as she composes*). Mr. Vicars is held in the highest esteem by his employers, whose complete confidence he enjoys. There! Haven't I got it nicely?

GEORGE (*admiringly*). Nora, you would have made a first-class lady journalist, if you hadn't married.

NORA. Stuff! And now, tell me, does Mrs. Vicars assist you with your solutions of *Scissors & Paste* competitions? (*She laughs*.)

GEORGE. Hang it, Nora! What do you want me to say?

NORA. Nothing! Mr. Vicars was silent. . . .

GEORGE (*continuing*) . . . for a moment. I wished to surprise her, he resumed. Women love surprises . . .

NORA (*cuttingly*). Shakespeare! And to what do you intend to devote your splendred winnings, Mr. Vicars? (I think he should say that, about now.)

GEORGE. There is the sweetest little hat at Madame Jacqueline's, and the duckiest little pearl and turquoise. . . .

NORA. George, do be sensible!

GEORGE. You're a nice interviewer! Don't you want the truth, when you can get it?

NORA. Oh, yes, and have everybody calling after me, *Scissors & Paste*, when I go out in my new hat . . . and pendant!

GEORGE. Oh, so it's quite settled . . .?

NORA. Long ago! (*She closes her eyes and continues.*) A part of my prize, replied Mr. Vicars, I shall devote to a most deserving charitable object. . . .

GEORGE. Don't call yourself names, my dear!

NORA (*resuming*) . . . My wife and I, who are very fond of travel, propose to pay a long delayed visit to the Austrian Tyrol, this autumn. We shall probably visit Egypt during the coming winter, calling for the winter sports in the Engadine, on the return journey. . . .

(GEORGE stands aghast.)

That is an excellent idea, replied the *Scissors & Paste* man. There, George! The Tyrol, Egypt, the Engadine! Doesn't it sound lovely?

GEORGE. Nora, aren't you going a little too far?

NORA. I'm trying to make as good a show as I can, you old goose.

GEORGE. *Swan*, please!

NORA. And now, Mr. Vicars, may I ask what suggested your winning "*Rubicon*"? I feel sure you will be willing to tell me, for the benefit of less clever *Scissors & Paste* readers.

GEORGE. Certainly, sir. You will understand I have always in mind how great a success my married life has been. It has, indeed, been what I call Immense. There you have the idea—Immense, Successful Matrimony." I felt quite sure I had hit on the right thing!

NORA. Boaster! And so it has proved, Mr. Vicars! And so saying, our representative took leave of the victorious one, sighing a regretful farewell to the "Nest," the pleasant name given to their residence by Mr. Vicars. . . .

GEORGE (*supplementing*) . . . and his charming wife!

NORA. You darling! (*She kisses him.*)

GEORGE. He won't do *that*, I suppose?

NORA. Hardly, I think. George, have you noticed the time?

GEORGE. No! I say! We must hurry up! Why . . . look here, Nora, I shall miss him! You'll have to tell him I'm abroad. Gone to West Africa for the day on business . . . anything! (*Rubbing his hands, gleefully.*) How splendid to have dodged him!

NORA. Oh, yes! And leave me to tackle him, and make him think you're the handsomest, cleverest, busiest. . . . George! How can I . . . ?

(*Bell rings. NORA rushes to the window, pressing her nose flat against it, so as to be able to get a view of the porch. GEORGE follows.*)

NORA (*hollowly, turning to him*). George, it's the man!

GEORGE (*in a tragic voice*). The hour has come!

NORA. You'll have to see him, now. Mary will show him into the drawing-room. . . . You'll be all right if you keep your head.

GEORGE. Oh, I *can't*!

NORA (*firmly*). You must! (*She stands at the table, waiting for him to advance.*)

GEORGE (*coming up to her*). Nora! (*taking her arm.*) The sweetest, duckiest little . . . (*with an inspiration*) . . . and such a darling sapphire bracelet. . . !

NORA (*dazzled*). Oh! (*She takes both his hands in hers.*) George, I'll . . . I'll do it! But you must get out of the way at once. You must fly! (*She drags*

him towards the door.) Quick, get your hat and gloves! No! Stop a minute. . . . I will!

(She tiptoes softly to the door, quietly opens it, vanishes for a moment, and returns with her husband's hat, gloves and stick.)

NORA. There! *(She hands him his property.)* Hush! *(With an air of triumph.)* George . . . he smokes! I can smell him! Give me your best cigars!

GEORGE. Nora, you're a dangerous woman . . . and you're a darling! I know you'll manage him splendidly. *(He crosses to the sideboard, finds the cigars, and brings the box to her.)* Give him the lot! *(He goes towards the door.)*

NORA *(with a little shriek)*. Not that way! He'll hear you! Through the French window!

(She hurries him along. They embrace.)

GEORGE *(patting her on the back)*. You're a brave little woman! Now remember! Sparkle & Twinks' at half-past four . . .

NORA . . . Tea somewhere, and Jacqueline's on the way home! *(With a little laugh.)* As if I should forget! You old dear! *(She kisses him, then spins him round, and pushes him towards the French window.)* Hush! Good-bye.

(Exit GEORGE. NORA kisses her hand to him, then closes the windows and crosses to the door, R. With her hand on the knob, she turns, gives a quiet little laugh, and crosses to the table, putting down the cigar-box. She flits towards the mirror over the fireplace, glances at herself, approvingly, and pats her hair a little. She then turns, crosses—taking up the cigars, as she passes—exclaims softly to herself, "Now for it!"—and sallies forth to victory.)

CURTAIN.

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